A tale of two quarantines: Compassion abroad, Conflict at home

By Nicholas David Bowman (包尼克)

"So … you know where to get face masks, right?"

In all of my years visiting Asia, I'd never once been asked about face masks. Yet with the novel coronavirus emerging in China, my Taiwanese colleagues wanted to make sure that I knew where to get masks (answer: most any convenience store), how to wear them (over the mouth and nose, tight seal) and how often to replace them (at least once daily). The civic mood was still calm in Taipei, but concerns over travelers for the Lunar New Year did have us on high alert over fears that natural travel flows could turn families into disease vectors. Taking their advice, I grabbed a few masks and stuffed them in my backpack. Just in case.

At the start of 2020, Taiwan had so very few cases, and the Year of the Metal Rat still had us in good spirits. Markets were abuzz and people were generally out and about. Just a few more masks than usual. The world-famous Taiwanese hospitality was still on full display, but smiles and social graces were just a bit harder to pick up on. I learned to read facial muscles to infer disposition. Ekman would have been proud.

For me, the first real turn towards quarantine was January 31. I had spent the day off work, instead exploring Ximending (西門町) to take in a few of my loves: craft beers and pop culture.

Heading to dinner, I had my temperature unexpectedly taken at the front door by one staff member while the other sprayed me with a mild disinfectant. Nothing aggressive and they even sort of laughed and smiled, explaining that they were trying to keep the bar clean. It made sense, as it's a pretty small pub: maybe 12 or 15 total stools.

Over the next few days, I noticed more places taking temperature measures. More clerks and waiters and mass transit officials wearing masks and gloves. Mostly business as usual, but with cloth and Latex accouterments and a little bit of distance. Social distance wasn't really a concept (Taiwan wouldn't begin discussing social distancing until April), but people did keep to themselves. In Taiwan, this was somewhat odd—I had gotten used to impromptu conversations.

Forward about one week, and I had my first real encounter with quarantine. In that week, health officials learned that passengers from the ill-fated *Diamond Princess* cruise ship held shore excursions through many Taipei hot-spots on January 31—naturally including Ximending. There on a Google map created by local authorities, the city of Taipei was pock-marked with translucent red "bulls-eyes." Each one

represented (a) a place that I'd surely visited that day that (b) somebody from the cruise ship had also visited.

Indeed, one of those bulls-eyes had marked me as a possible disease vector, and doubly so as I hadn't work a mask that day. As I read the news on my smartphone, my mind began to mess with my body: light dizziness, unexplained coughs, and a sudden flushness. All false alarms.

The recommended course of action? 14 days of immediate self-management (a nice term for "suggested quarantine:" daily temperature checks, and a special number for reporting any illness. If I did have to leave my apartment, wearing a face mask was compulsory, as was avoiding any crowds or public transit. That last one was tough, as my only access to the city and the rest of Taiwan was by bus or train. Suddenly a city with a population of nearly three million felt as far away as Texas.

And yet during this time of isolation? I was pulled so much closer to my new home.

I took early-morning jogs to avoid social contact, and the gentle gestures and waves of the community kept me calm: the apple vendor across from my apartment, the man playing his flute under the bridge every morning, and the noodle vendor who sold me my daily respite. Each of them would nod, and it was just another day. I scrambled to purchase a personal thermometer at a local pharmacy, and the physician working there

giggled when I confused a fertility thermometer—explaining politely that I didn't need "such a precise measurement for my fever." A local clinic kept me supplied with face masks—as an alien resident, I was covered under Taiwan's nationalized healthcare system. My newfound Taiwanese friends checked on me, and gave me tips for dining and otherwise a good word here and there.

Forward again to mid-March, and the US Department of Education asked all Fulbright scholars to immediately repatriate. With 48 hours of their email, I boarded a flight back to the United States, unsure of what I would meet. My Taiwanese colleagues, worried about my travel, packed my bags with extra face masks and extra sanitizers—one drug store sold me his entire box of masks so that I could give them to my family when I got home.

It turns out that their concern for the situation at home was well-founded. Via social media and news reports, Americans seemed deeply divided over the coronavirus: some asking for calm and others rejecting the virus as "political." In San Francisco, I saw crowds pushing for their luggage at the carousel, and others emptying out a communal bottle of hand sanitizer into their personal water bottles. Some wearing face masks and gloves and shouting at folks who weren't, others refusing any personal protective equipment and declaring the virus to be a hoax. That last part was particularly hard for me, as I had been living COVID-19 for three months. I'd seen one nation come together to successfully fight it back, while another … very much not.

On arriving in Texas, I was asked to strictly self-quarantine for 14 days. That time has long expired, but I've not left the house since then. The conflict and aggression that surrounds me is enough to stay home, and even stay offline.

I think about Taipei a lot these days.